Oops! All Autistic!

Foreword

It feels like only a few days ago that I was browsing the ‘net, searching for a zine revolving around neurodiverse characters in some way. My shock that there wasn’t one yet led to one thing, which led to another, until this beautiful zine was created!

Said beautiful zine couldn’t have been made, though, without my lovely mod team, who have helped me each and every step of the way. I would like to thank the entire team! I want to thank our Discord mod, and my partner, Verdant, for looking after our base of operations. Furthermore, I want to thank our art mod, Ephraim, for working so diligently with many of our contributors! I would also like to thank our writing mod, Alice: the zine’s token allistic, beta reader, and all-around sweetheart! I’d like to say thank you to Kori, our zine’s extremely skilled graphics mod. And finally, I’d like to extend a big ‘thank you’ to our formatting mod, Andi, for putting all of what you see here together!

I would like to dedicate the many, many hours put into this zine to every autistic youth that there is, ever has been, or ever will be. Canon autistic representation in animation (whether that animation be for youths or not) is slowly growing, but still has a long way to go. No matter if the autistic character(s) you have latched onto are canon, coded, or headcanon autistic, please know that the act of recognizing yourself in fiction and claiming it as such is a radical, extraordinary act.

Everyone involved in this zine has done such an amazing job, and I couldn’t be prouder. I hope that our readers will love this zine as much as we loved making it! Let’s celebrate every character who has acted as a key for an autistic person’s self-recognition together; all through the creations of actually autistic creators!

And remember: autistic self-love is a necessary revolution!

- Azure (Head Mod / Social Media)

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NAHY ILLUSTRATES

A Question of Effort

BY: AZURE

ACCOMPANYING ART BY: AZURE

It was always business whenever Rouge tried to speak to Shadow, it seemed.

Now, she didn't used to mind this. Back when she was happier with the company of a gemstone rather than a friend, her and Shadow's arrangement worked just fine for both of them. If anything, she was only worried that Shadow didn't seem to take to her, because of her easy-to-talk to demeanor being key to many of her strategies.

Much had changed since then, though. Over time, she had been slowly integrated into the heroes' little group, and, before she realized what was happening, she had started to join them, not only in fighting Robotnik, but also in their casual hangouts. Stubborn as ever, and never losing that willingness to fight with the other heroes if they disagreed with her, she found her rough edges being sanded away. And perhaps worse — she found she didn't mind.

Shadow did not receive the same treatment.

It was likely a matter of willingness. Rouge was quite the socialite, after all. In contrast, even Shadow's allies are lucky to get a handful of words out of him.

Still, Rouge looked back at him, and couldn't help but feel like he too, should open up a bit.

Couldn't help but feel like she had left her old partner behind.

And, while she was currently working on searching for a certain prism... Well, a woman could multitask.

"Somehow, I'm getting the feeling you lied about needing me here."

Rouge perked up from where she stood admiring the shoe display, and turned to look at Shadow. "Oh, 'lie' is such a strong word! I prefer... 'Overexaggerate'." She chuckled, shooting him a mischievous smile.

Shadow, currently leaning against the wall of the small clothing shop, gave her a thoroughly unimpressed look.

Rouge walked back over to him, waving the hand which wasn't carrying every jeweled object the shop offered. "Oh, don't give me that. It's not as if you'd have exactly come running if I told you that I wanted to check out the new boutique, would you? And speaking of, darling, didn't I tell you to pick some things out for yourself, as well?"

Shadow's expression didn't change, brushing a hand through his quills. "I don't bring money to what I assume is going to be a heist."

Rouge's body stiffened, quickly turning to the owner of the small store to ensure the owner didn't hear Shadow's casual mention of a robbery. Honestly, it was as if he had no self-awareness at times.

Assured that they weren't being kicked out, Rouge turned back to Shadow, shrugging. "The least you can do is look around."

"The lights are too loud."

It was Rouge's turn to give an incredulous look, furrowing her brows. "Pardon?"

Shadow spoke slower this time, with a tone indicating that Rouge was the stupid one for not getting it the first time. "The lights are too loud."

Rouge nodded slowly, then brought her attention to her ears. If anything was making noise, she, out of anyone, should be able

to hear it. After a few moments of focusing, she noticed a sound which she had tuned out: a low buzzing. One which, indeed, was louder than one would expect, and seemingly came from the overhead lights.

Rouge stopped focusing, and brought a hand to her chin, thinking. "Right."

She distantly wondered if Shadow was making an excuse. She had a pair of the most sensitive ears around. If anyone had a right to complain about noise, it was her. But, if the goal was to get Shadow to make more connections, perhaps modeling understanding would be better than asking questions.

After calculating her next step, Rouge grinned at her shopping partner, already turning to walk towards the desk. "Then come, now. It's time for you to watch a professional haggler at work."

Going out, then, was a bust. But Rouge was able to work with that. Her plot was flexible, after all, and the next plan was more similar to her own path to companionship — namely, being around the heroes as a group.

Getting Shadow to join them involved a lot more force than she had needed, but that was a minor bump in the road. Less minor, was a refusal to participate.

As herself, Amy, Sonic, Tails and Knuckles all chatted with ease about whatever came to mind, Shadow sat on a rock next to Rouge, completely silent unless directly prompted to speak. And even then, sometimes, the person speaking to him would just get a stare in return.

Without looking, Rouge could feel Shadow's leg bouncing idly as he sat, with eventually, all of this culminating in him getting up and leaving without a word as Tails spoke.

She turned to watch him go in shock, and she heard the other heroes chirp out their goodbyes from behind her; including Tails, who interrupted himself for the sake of doing so.

Rouge crossed one leg over the other, sighing loudly as she turned back to the group. Shadow couldn't stand being one-on-one with Rouge, and he couldn't stand being with her in a group setting... She worried for him. She didn't like it, but she did.

"Well, that was a bit rude, wasn't it?"

The others gave various noncommittal responses — shrugs, head tilts, hums. Amy was the only one to speak, replying in an almost defensive tone, "He's not exactly the talkative type. I'm just glad he came!"

Rouge nodded thoughtfully. "I know. I just..." She tilted her head to one side, sighing again. "I just wish he would put in a bit of effort into getting out of his constant brooding solitude."

She jumped a bit in her spot when everyone responded at once. One starting with "but", another ending with "though". Variable deliveries. But all saying the same thing: "He is."

Knuckles, from his spot in a tree's shade, pointed upwards. "Especially when the sun's so bright."

Ah. Rouge hadn't noticed it, but it was rather bright out today; hardly a cloud in the sky. She knew of Knuckles' tendencies to avoid harsh sunlight wherever he could, due to him being autistic. It hadn't occurred to her that perhaps Shadow had similar issues. Though, of course, Shadow and Knuckles shared quite a few traits. Both men of few words, with an aversion to touch and quick tempers.

... Wait.

Oh, how to ask this. Rouge brought her hand to her face, resting her cheek against it. "Oh, darlings, I just had a thought. Do you lot think that, perhaps, Shadow is...?"

Sonic beat her to the punch. "Autistic?"

Rouge blinked a few times, caught off guard, before nodding curtly. "Yes."

"I've never got the chance to ask, but I've been assuming." Knuckles replied.

Sonic nodded at Knuckles with his signature grin. "Yeah, were we not all waiting for him to bring it up himself?" He looked around, surveying reactions.

"I never considered it," Tails responded, raising an eyebrow thoughtfully, "But it would explain an awful lot."

Then, Amy piped in with a wave of her hand and said, "Yeah, same here!" She looked at Rouge with curiosity. "Why do you ask?"

Rouge belatedly noticed her ears pinned back and straightened them, leaning back on her hands and sighing loudly. "Oh, I worry I've been internally putting too heavy of expectations onto him."

"Well, if it's just internally, then you can fix that, right?" Sonic replied easily. "Shadow's... Not the easiest guy to get a read on, but you're doing fine."

Rouge continued thinking for a moment, before smiling, her body releasing tension she hadn't realized it was holding. "Thank you, darling. I am doing my best."

Long after the others had dispersed, Rouge remained perched on her rock, eyes closed, face turned towards the sun and deep in thought. About how she had allowed herself to rely on others. What that looked like.

What that might look like for others different than her.

"I wish he could put in effort."

"He is."

Perhaps, it wasn't the actions taken while together that mattered to Shadow. Perhaps the act of talking, of shopping... Maybe that was secondary.

"The lights are too loud."

"Especially when the sun's so bright."

"I'm just glad he came!"

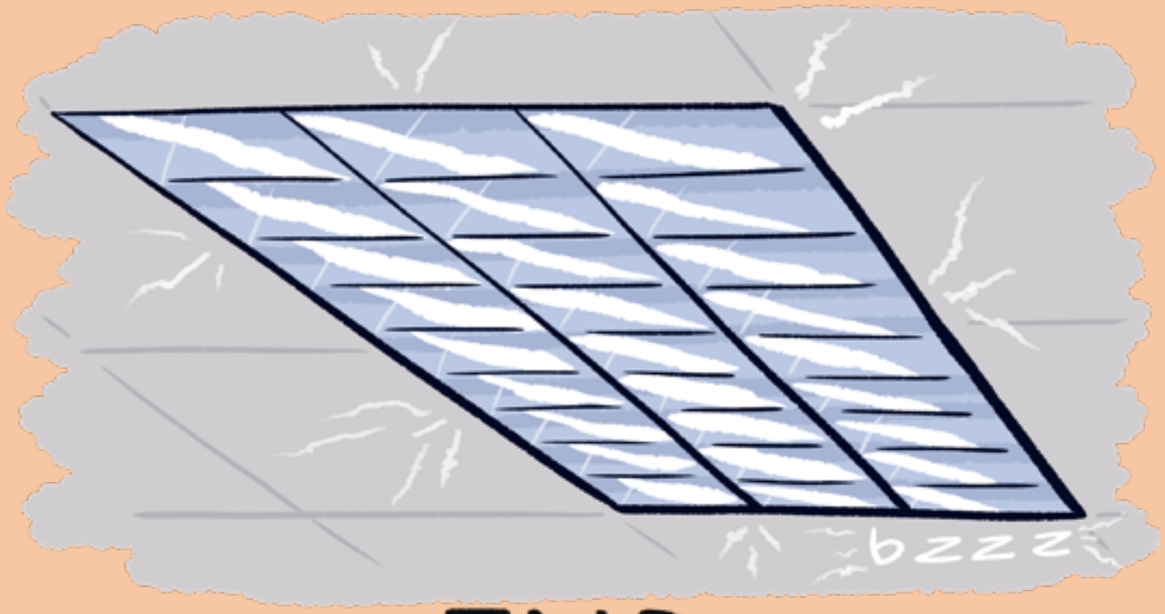
It seemed that just putting in the effort to be around others at all was Shadow's way of making connections.

Rouge hummed. Someone else hummed back.

She jolted in place, squeaking and her eyes opening wide. She quickly turned towards the sound, then relaxed, exhaling gently when she saw Shadow. Sitting in the same shady spot Knuckles had been; absentmindedly brushing his quills with his free hand as he read from a book in silence.

He glanced up, noticing Rouge noticing him. He held up a hand in a silent 'hello'. Rouge raised her hand back, giving a wave and a grin. Before Shadow lowered his hand and resumed silently reading, he grinned back.

The two of them sat in each other's company for many hours, after that.



END.

Van Helsing, Bela Lugosi...

Dracula, Nosferatu, Castlevania...

Viridian Homecoming

BY: DEL

ACCOMPANYING ART BY: PIXELDOTGAMER

The gentle breeze of Pallet Town felt like a sigh of relief compared to the snowstorms of Mt. Silver. Much had changed over the last two years— Red had mixed feelings about the state of Viridian Forest— but Pallet Town looked just the same, as if he never left.

The very second he opened the front door, he's smothered in kisses and "*oh, how I've missed you*"s and "*my sweet baby boys*"s. Once he escaped his mother's grasp, he signed a quick '*hello*.' Taking the hint, she took a small step back.

Red spent many months on Mt. Silver, far away from anything remotely considered civilization. He could count on one hand how many people he encountered during his training. It was exactly one overly keen trainer who seemed fascinated by Red and how he took Team Rocket down "*the first time*", something that filled Red with unease and was definitely a question for...

"Blue is the Gym Leader at Viridian now." His mother said with a smile. "You should go see him."

'*I just got back and you're pushing me out the door?*' He signed back.

"Well, you two are inseparable so I figured you'd set right off!"

‘*Fine, if you want me to go.*’ Red signed with a smile on his face; it would be a lie if he said Blue wasn’t a top priority.

The last time Red had seen Blue was when he left for Johto, standing behind the crowd seeing him off— he didn’t say a word. The last time Red had spoken to Blue, he had just won the Championship match. There were no words to describe how he felt.

The journey to Viridian City felt like a small stroll compared to his odyssey. On the outside, the Gym looked mostly the same as it did two years ago. But now, the building just had a fresh coat of paint. The sign was no longer faded, although it still didn’t have the Gym Leader’s name. Did he want to leave it a surprise, Red wondered. It wasn’t every day that a former Champion became a Gym Leader, after all.

“Hello Challeng-” Danpei stepped forward, only to stop right in his tracks. “I don’t need to give you this monologue again, do I? Champ?”

Red gave a courteous nod and wave. Danpei stepped out of the way and gestured back into the building. In the very back of the Gym, Red could see him waiting. Hidden in the shadows, his outline was still visible. Standing, waiting, watching. Red’s stomach immediately started churning. Surviving a snowstorm on a tall

mountain in the middle of nowhere was nothing compared to this.

“Red.” Blue’s voice cut through the silence as Red walked forward.

The pit in his stomach grew twice in size, his feet now glued to the floor. What was he even going to *say* again? Blue was *mad*, the tone in his voice said it all. What was the point of-

“*Geez*, I know you’re not a man of many words but you could at least sign a ‘*hello*’.”

‘*Hello*’, Red signed. Blue, at least, seemed to recognise the humor in the situation.

“Anything else to say?” Blue hovered at the edge of the battlefield in the centre of the gym. He tapped his foot on the slightly elevated edges of the platform. Red saw the glimpses of hurt— no, betrayal (maybe both)— across Blue’s face. “It’s been two years and all you can say is ‘hello’?”

‘*I missed you.*’ A different, third emotion flashed across Blue’s face.

“Alright then,” Blue scoffed. His usual braggadocious demeanor returned. “A battle it is, *Champion* Red. Let’s see if all that training paid off!”

Once Red stepped onto the battlefield, he felt a strange sense of calm wash over him. This is what the two of them did best. If words weren't enough— they never were— then battling was the only way to get their feelings across. Blue's fatal sin was pride, and well, Red… was Red.

Now came the guessing game. What Pokémon to start with was a key decision, one that would set the tone for the match. Blue had always tended to start a Pokémon battle with the same Pokémon. It had been two years since they last battled. Would he keep to the same methods he once did? Did Blue even have the same team members? Given the appearance of the Gym, it looked like that Blue didn't have a type speciality. So, that meant… He needed to keep things simple, so there was only one choice.

'*Dodrio!*' He signed to Blue just as he sent out his own choice, Pidgeot.

The battle of the birds began. Despite Dodrio's disadvantage in being land-bound, it put up a valiant effort against Pidgeot. But alas, Lapras was able to finish the job. In the chaos of the battlefield, Red's signature combination of whistle and hand signs were understood by friend and foe alike.

The battle raged on. Lapras fell to Exeggutor who lost to Gengar.

The battle raged on until there were two titans left standing— Charizard for Red, and Blastoise for Blue. The exact match up that their Champion battle ended on.

Red took a deep breath. He had the disadvantage; always had.

There was only one solution. The reason he went to Mt. Silver in the first place. The Mega Stone glowed, surrounding Red and Charizard in a bright light. The light faded to reveal Charizard's now blackened scales, highlighted by its own vivid blue flames.

Red looked across the field to see a similar glow dissipating. Blastoise's changes were less drastic, but the increase in size to its cannons was not a joke.

"You're not the only one who's gotten stronger!" Blue showed off his own Mega Bracelet. "Let's do this!"

The final showdown had begun, just like it did all those years ago. With its new upgrade, Charizard seemed to handle Blastoise's water attacks better, but Red could not underestimate Blastoise's newfound strength.

The battle between Charizard and Blastoise lasted just as long as the rest of the battle had. The Pokémon clearly did not want to let their masters down.

Red could feel victory in his grasp. '*Mega Punch!*' One last sign, and the battle was won. Blastoise, despite using all of its strength, could not get back up on its feet.

"Blastoise is unable to battle. The victory goes to Red!" Danpei's booming voice echoed in the otherwise empty Gym.

Blue kicked the ground beneath him, a flurry of gravel launching in a wave around him.

Red cautiously walked towards him. '*I missed you,*' he began to sign.

"Don't you think I missed you too?" Blue realized that his tone

was too sharp the second the words left his mouth.

‘*I just-*’

“I know, I know...” Blue sighed. “A letter would have been nice, something to know that you were still thinking of me.”

‘*You know I was, Blue. But the problem is’*, he smiled, ‘*carrier Pidgeys don’t exactly like snowy mountain tops.*’

“I suppose.” A small smile crept onto Blue’s face. “I’m sorry Red, sometimes I forget that you’re not like other people—” Red’s face dropped. “Hey, that’s my own fault! I should have known better. That’s what makes you special, and unique. And it’s why we get along so well.”

No one understands me like you do.

“Damn right, c’mere!” Blue pulled Red into an all-enveloping hug. He felt at ease for the first time in a long time.

[END.]

Blake?

Blake?

BLAKE!

Huh??

OH! Shit- Sorry, What?

Hmmmm....

*twitch twitch

Hey... Look at me.

You don't have to talk. Stay here, okay?

I'll be right back.

Promise.

hehe.

Perfect!!♡

BUSSIAN

Tap Tap

movie??

nod nod

Breaking the Mould

BY: EMILY FOWL

ACCOMPANYING ART BY: AZURE

Alfred's cooking was legendary in more circles than just their close family.

The whole Justice League and plenty of independent satellite heroes had an opportunity or two to try some of his cuisine, whether it had been at the Manor or via the snacks the man sent with Batman or Robin.

But out of his wide repertoire of meals, one reigned supreme, at least according to the Manor inhabitants— The Mac'n'cheese casserole.

It was absolutely delicious: the sauce was creamy, the pasta was perfectly soft, and the crust had just the right amount of crunch.

The one time Tim finally had an opportunity to try it, he'd been looking forward to it.

He was expecting perfection. Based on his experience with Alfred's cooking and the few times he overheard Jason and Dick discuss it during patrol, with the casserole always landing in first-

He was *not* expecting the onions.

A whole bunch of roughly chopped onions. Tim was sure there was a good reason for them to be there— maybe for extra flavor —but for him, their existence was *hell*.

He froze the moment his teeth met the unexpected bit buried deep within the gooey goodness. It took all of his resolve to swallow it without gagging.

Fortunately for him, the first time he had the casserole it was as leftovers, with no one in the kitchen alongside him. His mother's voice rang in his head as he threw his portion where no

one would notice it, the shrill '*you're not to waste food, Timothy!*' sounding so real, he had to turn around to make sure she wasn't really there.

Ever since, he's been avoiding the mac'n'cheese casserole with an intensity almost equal to the effort he put into most investigations.

Except that, this time, he got too distracted with research to realize that *everyone* was home, and that meant the casserole would be served.

He had taken a moment to consider his options, slowly making his way over to his spot. A portion was already placed on his plate, and he could hardly say he wasn't hungry anymore after already coming downstairs, so now he just had to find a way to make it disappear.

Tim could try and rush through the meal, swallowing it with barely any biting, but that might just make him choke. And it didn't guarantee that he'd avoid the onion, either.

Or maybe he could try digging the onion out, just like he had to do whenever someone else made scrambled eggs, but that would mean leaving a pile of onion bits behind on his plate.

His last option would be to eat slowly enough that everyone else had moved on, and sneak the leftovers into trash…

But it still required him to *start* eating.

Tim very carefully avoided showing the disgust on his face as he slowly picked up a small bite and brought it to his mouth. He chewed, very carefully, but it seemed like he'd gotten lucky; there were no onions in that part.

As he kept eating, he slowly realized that there were no onions in the casserole. At all. Not a *single* one.

Picking up speed as he went, Tim happily shoved the food in his mouth.

"I'm glad you're enjoying the new recipe, Master Timothy," Alfred commented, and, at his curious look, elaborated. "I've noticed you disliked having large bits of onion in your meals, so I've blended it for the casserole."

Tim smiled in thanks, his mouth too full to speak.

"*Four, five, six, seven-*"

Tim carefully shifted his gaze away from Bruce's eyes, letting it rest on the wall behind the man for a moment.

He couldn't keep looking away for too long— his father's '*look at me when I'm talking to you!*' echoing through his head— but with enough short breaks, it was bearable.

It was easier when they were still in masks— Tim only had to look vaguely in someone's direction to create the illusion of eye-contact— but they were already out of costumes for the night. This was just a quick debriefing before Tim could leave for his room and rest.

"-Tim?" Bruce's voice brought him back to reality. "Did you hear me?"

Tim winced. Shifting his head, he looked Bruce in the eye again. "Sorry, uh. What did you say?"

"I asked your thoughts on the tracks we've found near the crime scene." Bruce was frowning, and Tim fought the urge to apologize more. "You know you don't have to look at me when we're speaking, right?"

Blinking, Tim gaped at Bruce for a moment. "Uh…"

"I've noticed you tend to… time it." Bruce continued, as if he wasn't currently destroying most of what Tim knew about keeping a conversation. "I'd rather you put your full attention towards the matter at hand rather than split your focus managing eye-contact."

"I- Okay." He said. Bruce was usually good with not lying to Tim, but he'd need to test that before fully implementing it. No better time than the present, right? He shifted to look at his sleeves. "I don't think they're related. The tires aren't really compatible with any of the car models Sionis prefers."

Tim braced himself for the potential rebuke, but it didn't come.

"They could have paid a contractor…" Bruce pointed out instead.

With a small sigh of relief, Tim continued the conversation, not once looking away from his hands.

At this point, Tim no longer had any idea what he was doing *wrong*. Damian and him were definitely on better terms these days— the assassination attempts were almost completely finished by now, and they cooperated on their missions well enough— and yet, any time Tim would try to have a conversation with Damian, even just to *thank* him for something, the other would stomp away in a snit.

It couldn't have been his words, because it didn't matter what he said. It couldn't have been the tone of voice, either. He made

sure that he always used his 'Happy Voice', just as his mother taught him. Most of the time he even remembered to smile, too…

There was no point worrying about that right then, though. Tim was busy doing last-minute repairs to his gauntlet, after it took one hit too many in training. He needed it to be operational for patrol, so repairing it as soon as possible was a priority. At least it broke *now* while he was still at the Cave, and not out in Gotham-

The screwdriver he had just been looking for gets dangled in front of his face.

"Thanks," he said, too focused on the repair to control his tone.

Only once he finished did he realize it, wincing as he looked up. It was Damian who handed him the tool and, weirdly enough, he was still there. Sitting at the table next to Tim, he was restocking his own supply of batarangs.

Tim cleared his throat and tried again, making sure to control his voice better. "I mean, thanks-!"

"Don't do that," Damian scowled.

"...What?"

"You *always* do that!" The younger boy finished his restocking and pushed himself away from the table. "I can *hear* you faking it. I don't need you to be *artificially happy* when talking to me. Just be honest!"

And with that, he walked away, leaving a baffled Tim behind.

Tim was considering getting a new camera. He loved his old model, of course, but no matter how much he cared for it, taking it out onto the streets of Gotham every night for years hardly left it in favorable condition.

He'd been researching his other options for hours, so when Dick asked what he'd been up to that day, it wasn't hard to talk about all the specs he was looking for.

In fact, it was easy. *So* easy that he's monopolized the entire dinner table talk, and hadn't even realized he did until the dessert bowl thumped slightly as Alfred placed it before him.

Tim's mouth shut with a click as he stared at the piece of cake.

He… talked through the entire course of the meal. Usually, his father would interrupt him much sooner than this— an exasperated '*God, Timothy, can you not bore us to death for once?*' cutting into whatever he had been talking about— so why had no one-?

"You were saying?" Dick encouraged, and Tim raised his head to see everyone looking at him.

They… well, most of his family didn't know much about cameras, so they didn't exactly look *interested* but they didn't look *bored* either.

Just… invested.

"I think you should go for the one with more spare lens options." Stephanie weighed in, balancing a bit of the cake on her fork. "Remember that time you broke all your spares and had to wait a week for the delivery?"

"You should obviously pick the one with better image quality!" Damian piped up.

Suddenly, everyone seemed to have an opinion about which camera Tim should pick, and Tim couldn't help but feel happy about that.

penguin of the waddles

Natural Magic

BY: CLOVARIIA
ACCOMPANYING ART BY: BLOODYSAUROPOD

Bugs chirp and squeak in Wartwood's forest. The sounds of nature are music to Marcy's ears, despite her former distaste for the outdoors. Giant plants and cute creatures have far more appeal than the bustling city mayhem of Los Angeles.

Compared to the miserable monotony of Earth, Amphibia is a treasure trove of things to discover and research. The online roleplays she filled her days with back home are nothing compared to the taste of a real adventure. Fantasy worlds are thrilling places of belonging, and her new mentor Maddie is everything Marcy yearns to become.

Despite all the criticisms that get flung her way, Maddie carries herself with such confidence and commitment to her passions. She doesn't let other people define what she's supposed to be. She's unafraid to be genuine. Maddie manages to be authentically herself in a world that keeps pushing back against her quirks, and this feat fills Marcy with complete awe and respect.

She just can't understand why nobody else seems to view Maddie the same way she does.

"Hey, Apprentice!" the frog in question calls out. She points a few feet away. "Can you check over there? I've already got this bush covered."

The two have been digging through flowers together, but they aren't having much luck with finding the rare seeds they need for their revival spell. Marcy has been resisting the urge to jot down notes on every little fact Maddie teaches her — it turns out that real magic is way more complicated than the type Cynthia Coven learns in her books. Even a memory as strong as Marcy's struggles to retain all the foreign instructions that spill out of Maddie's mouth with ease.

She practically runs over to the spot Maddie indicated. Actually being able to help people is so exciting. Back on Earth, she was dependent on others in a world that wasn't built for her. Amphibia values her skills in a way her hometown never could, and the rush of being Newtopia's prized hero is addictive.

"I haven't seen these plants before," Marcy tells her. The two have kept up casual small talk while they work, which is another thing she could never do back home. "Do they normally grow around here? They're not in Newtopia, at least."

Maddie gives her a warning, but it's not one that shows a lack of faith in Marcy's capabilities. Marcy is unfamiliar with people having trust in her competence. Being believed in is a really nice feeling.

"Watch your hands — these ones can spit pretty nasty venom, and I'm not sure how human skin would react to it," Maddie explains. "But yeah, they're a Wartwood-exclusive. I don't think that dumb king wants poisonous flora hanging around some fancy-shmancy place like Newtopia."

Marcy claps her palms together and lets out a little squeal of excitement. "Fascinating!" she exclaims. But then, she pauses to soak in the rest of Maddie's claim. "Why don't you like King Andrias, though? He's super-duper nice to me! I bet he'd love

what you can do! Not to brag, but this is advice straight from the chief ranger of Newtopia's night guard — so I know a thing or two about how ol' Andy works."

She receives an utterly puzzled look from Maddie in return.

"No way! I'm not supposed to be messing around with magic. Especially not spells as advanced as resurrection ones!" she explains. There's an anxiety in her expression that could only come from regrettable memories. "My Dad's always getting on my case about it."

Marcy freezes in the middle of rooting through the bush. Her hands hover in midair, and the frustrated look on Maddie's face breaks her heart. Marcy clearly reminded Maddie of uncomfortable experiences. She messed up while talking to someone she's trying to be friends with. Again.

"Do people think you're…?" She searches for the appropriate words that won't come to her. Everything that's hanging on her mind is too heavy to tell someone she's only met today. Probably. That's what she's been taught, at least.

Unexpectedly, Maddie finishes Marcy's sentence for her. Her best friends can't follow her thought process this easily.

"Weird? Creepy? Broken?" she suggests. Her motions grow more aggressive while she keeps yanking berries off the bushes. The fruit is sweet, but her feelings are painfully bitter. "Yeah, all of the above. And so much more, too. But I didn't feel like myself until I discovered dark magic. I'm happier this way, but nobody seems to get why! It sucks!"

The things Marcy is 'supposed' to say don't feel right. Phony comforts won't help. Encouraging Maddie to try more 'acceptable' hobbies won't fix anything. Marcy knows the pain of pushing down what brings her joy better than anyone.

And so, she lets herself be honest in a way she can only be in Amphibia.

"I think I understand what you're feeling," she says. "Maybe."

Maddie almost seems annoyed by this. She huffs a little and pops one of the berries into her mouth.

"I doubt it," she protests. "You've got Anne. You actually have friends."

Suddenly, their search for the spell's ingredients seems much less important. Pressure tightens around Marcy's heart like the thorny green vines around them.

"I love my girls more than anything, I swear I do, but…I don't think they always understand me," she admits. "And that's why we ended up here in the first place. That makes me a pretty bad friend, doesn't it?"

Actually confessing to her guiltiest secret, even so vaguely, makes Marcy tense up. Maddie's glare melts away into sympathetic confusion. With slow, hesitant steps, she joins Marcy at the bush she was looking through.

"What do you mean?"

Oh no. She's said too much. A thick layer of lies conceals Marcy's true feelings to protect Anne and Sasha's reputations — and her own. Her besties aren't mean to her. They spend time together and include her in their activities. They eat lunch at the same table and know each other's houses like their own. Her initials are scrawled on all their notebooks, written in green pen and surrounded by doodles of characters she likes. She owns a piece of both of their hearts, although it might be smaller than the places they take up in hers.

Anne and Sasha are her friends…even though she has to constrict into a smaller version of herself to keep them happy.

"Well, I already belong here more than I ever did back home. I mean, I've never met anyone like you on Earth," Marcy confesses. "The stuff you can do is incredible, Teach! Seriously, you're amazing! I totally wanna pick at your brain and learn everything you know — wait, not in a weird way! Shoot, did that sound weird?"

They don't meet each other's gazes, but Maddie gets her attention by placing something in Marcy's hand. It's a little berry, one of the sweet ones she picked from the poisonous plants.

"Well, these fruits get overlooked by most people too. But, if you know what to look for, they're everywhere," she says. Marcy stares at the gift and completely misses Maddie's soft smile. "Maybe we're kind of like that. It turns out there really was someone who'd understand me out there…even if I had to wait for her to get thrown into this dump from another dimension."

Bright flavors flood Marcy's mouth when the berry pops on her tongue. She grins down at her new friend — she's already certain she can call Maddie one.

"I wouldn't call Amphibia a dump," she says, a little offended. "But…I'm glad I finally found a place like this one. I'm really happy here."

Metaphors don't usually work well for Marcy's very literal brain, but there's something about Maddie that makes her easier to connect with. They're like different flowers growing on the same plant. In Amphibia, she's been able to bloom to an extent that Earth would never allow.

"Wait, wait! There they are!" Maddie interrupts with a shout. She points at the fruit juices on Marcy's hand. "The seeds we needed for the spell were inside these the whole time! My book didn't say anything about that!"

Marcy brings her palm closer to her face and examines the tiny specimens. They'll do nicely for their purpose, even though they revealed themselves in an unexpected way.

"I told you these were over here!" Marcy exclaims. Maddie's cheers fill her with giddy pride. "I guess books don't know everything…even though they totally should, because that's the entire point of them!"

That gets a laugh out of Maddie, even though she wasn't joking.

"Good work, Apprentice. I never would've thought of breaking these berries open on my own," she says. "I guess I just had to change my approach."

The student usually isn't supposed to surpass the teacher, but Marcy and Maddie are a lot of things that they aren't 'supposed' to be. Having someone who truly views her as an equal is weird — but weird isn't bad. 'Weird' can be as sweet as the berries of Wartwood, and as exciting as the allure of forbidden magic. It can come in the form of a mentor-turned-friend.

"There's no time to waste! We've gotta hunt for the next ingredient!" Marcy reminds her. She picks a few more berries for

the trip and splits them with Maddie. “Oh, and…thanks for hanging out with me. You’re super fun to spend time with!”

Sunlight beams on Maddie’s smiling face that’s normally twisted into a dark scowl. Acceptance makes her inner radiance shine in a way few other people ever get to see.

“You’re pretty cool yourself, Human.”

As they continue their spell-making, the magical forests and flora of Wartwood teach Marcy and Maddie the joy of being understood.

FINAL PRODUCT:

Open-Ended Questions

BY: EVERETT HYDE
ACCOMPANYING ART BY: AZURE

Anya Forger's going to do her best in her school work today, because she has her secret weapon— studying.

Papa said she can either study more for her new tests or take penmanship lessons after school. Only one of those comes with hot cocoa and peanuts, so she worked extra hard for this quiz. Eden College expects excellence from the youngest students, so the work's a bit advanced for her age, but if everyone around her can do it, there's no reason why she can't.

She even read the chapter before coming to class! Anya's really on a roll! She waved her hands for the paper, scrawled her name, and arrived at the first question.

What is the symbolism behind not being able to breathe?

Oh, easy! It's… not a part of the passage. She furrowed her brow, concentrating on the words. The answer's not mentioned in the story at all. The main guy has trouble breathing a lot, but she thought he was like those kids who can't get through gym class without those pipes they put to their mouth and breathe in. That's not a symbolism, is it?

Maybe she's overthinking and can pick out the answer with a skim over a few minds. She cracked open other people's thoughts for a hint.

"I don't remember any of this-"

"Why didn't I skip lunch to study-"

"If I don't pass, my dad's going to be so mad-"

"I don't know how to spell the author's name-"

“This is too hard!”

She shook her head to get rid of the voices, focusing back on the test. Fine, her classmates won’t help? Then she’ll skip this question and come back to it later.

Describe an example of foreshadowing in the passage.

Foreshadowing. That’s a vocabulary word, she remembers that. But if the teacher wants an example, is there a specific one they want? Which one is the right one?

Did a kid just get up and hand their paper in? She’s working too slowly. Go to the next question and hope it’s easier.

Why did the author put emphasis on the cultural divide between the two nations?

She doesn’t know. She’s not the author. The children on either side of her stood up in sync. Next question.

What’s the significance of changing the protagonist’s name in the narration?

Why does the protagonist talk in two distinct voices in their head?

Why do the protagonists never make eye contact with their boss?

Anya’s breath stuttered in a sharp exhale as Master Henderson stamped his cane on the ground. “Five minutes.”

She doesn’t have a single answer, and when she checks the students around her, everyone except for two have already left to go home. Her friends walked out without saying goodbye. She needs to finish so she can get to the bus on time.

But with five minutes left, what can she even accomplish? She can’t answer everything, and what she can scribble out will only be wrong. Is there a point to trying at all?

Another student handed in their paper. She gripped her pencil so tightly the graphite snapped. She needs to do something. She can’t just turn in a blank page! She imagined her papa looking through her grades, holding up the big ‘zero’ without anything on it.

“She’s not even going to try now?”

“Anya didn’t bother to write anything down?”

“I know Eden College is challenging for kids her age, but this is completely unacceptable.”

“She’s never watching those cartoons again after this stunt.”

The boy sitting behind her put his pencils away. She’s the only kid left. Master Henderson’s watching her through narrowed eyes and a monocle.

There’s no point in continuing like this. Anya scooped up her paper and walked to the teacher’s desk, keeping her eyes on the ground. She placed the page at the top of the stack before wobbling back to her chair to slowly pack her bag.

It took a second for Henderson to speak. “Miss Forger.”

She flinched, hunching her shoulders as she picked up her eraser.

"Miss Forger," Henderson tried again, sounding much closer. She jumped as he tapped his cane close to her leg to alert her to his proximity. "Look at me, please."

When she craned her neck, the teacher's face stayed solemn and cold. He held the empty quiz in one hand, gripping his cane with the other. "What exactly is this?"

"My quiz, sir."

"It's blank."

"I-I know."

"Is there a reason why?"

"No sir, it just is." There's no way she's admitting she didn't understand it, not when everyone else could at least *guess*. She could poke into their minds and feel the confusion and anxiety, but they *still* managed to finish the assignment. Unlike her, who froze and did nothing.

"*Strange*," Henderson mused to himself, "*the young Forger always tried, at the very least. Even when her grades barely passed, she finished every piece of homework we gave her.*"

Right. According to the grown ups, she didn't even try today. Anya did her best to hide her sulking as she buckled her backpack and slid it around her shoulders.

"Hold on a moment, Miss Forger." Henderson placed the quiz on the desk, gesturing for her to sit. "Let's try again."

"I already failed it."

"Did you ask for help?"

She pouted, both of them knowing the answer to that question, at least. Anya dropped her bag, hopping into her chair. "No."

"Then tell me, what is giving you trouble?"

"It wasn't in the book we read." She watched him pull a pencil from a drawer in his desk and offer it up, eventually taking it. "The answers are too many."

"Too broad, you mean?"

"I guess." Anya tapped the graphite on the first question, mumbling much quieter, "but everyone else figured it out." Reading minds doesn't help when she's surrounded by kids who are better than her.

Henderson's thoughts droned in a quiet mutter, too full of big words for her to understand, before he rounded the table and sat next to her on the bench. "Miss Forger, please read the first question out loud."

"What is the symbol behind not breathing."

"Symbolism. Do you remember what symbolism is?"

"No."

"Then we'll think of it this way…" Henderson drummed his fingers on the head of his cane before settling on a new phrase. "Why can't the protagonist breathe?"

"The main guy is the *pro taggest*, right?"

"Why can't the main guy breathe?"

"He's scared." Anya chewed her cheek as she mulled it over. "He can't breathe when he thinks his family doesn't like him."

"Write that down."

She obeyed, a lump in her throat as her teacher watched her. "Next is an example of four shadows."

“When does the writer say something that tells you something bad will happen?”

“When they keep mentioning losing a finger. The lady’s brother hurt his hand really badly so he can’t use a finger anymore, but they kept saying it to the lady. Like…” She turned her head to look at Henderson, testing the waters before she spoke her thoughts aloud. “Like he got hurt for her, maybe? And the writer four shadows the lady so you’d know it was to help her.”

“That’s a very good insight, Miss Forger. Write that down.”

This routine continued until they reached the end of the quiz, Henderson taking it and nodding along to each answer.

“I’ll grade this for you later, but I think you did quite elegantly. Do you have homework you were troubled by?”

“I think I missed the bus-”

“I’ll call your parents and let them know you’re working. Take out your homework so we can go over it.” With that, Henderson stood and strolled to the phone hooked in the corner of the room.

Anya wished she could hear her papa on the line, but he spoke too softly. With telepathy, she knows everything Henderson says right before it leaves his lips.

“No, Anya’s not in trouble. We took a quiz today and- yes, she behaved during the quiz. We realized she was having trouble with the material, so she’s staying here to go over it. There are teachers other than me on campus, not to worry. I think she may need extra help, maybe from a tutor. We’ll go over that later.”

Not a tutor! She resisted the urge to groan and smack her head on the desk as he hung up. Henderson’s glare could pin her to the wall.

“Is something wrong, Miss Forger?”

“I can’t have a tutor.”

“Why?”

“Imperial Scholars don’t have tutors.”

“Anya.” Her teacher crossed the room and dropped to a crouch, one hand on her shoulder. “The best scholars have tutors because they need them.”

“The tutor will just be scary.”

“Am I scary?”

“No sir.”

“Then I’ll work with you today.”

Henderson picked up the science workbook she withdrew, opening up the first page. “Now, let’s make sure these questions are understandable to you before we answer them.”

Merch Spotlight

Autistic Pride Merch
by Natyillustrates

Oops! All Autistic Merch
by vampire.artist

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